











**APHORISMS  
OF  
OSCAR WILDE**





# APHORISMS *of* OSCAR WILDE

SELECTED AND ARRANGED  
By G. N. SUTTON



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## NOTE

**I**T is very difficult to classify Wilde's epigrams at all logically. They can often be applied to almost anything. Separate titles to each aphorism would, of course, have been impossible, and even the rough grouping I have made cannot, I am afraid, claim to be an accurate definition.

My special thanks are due to Mr. Robert Ross for several happy suggestions; and to Mr. Charles Carrington, of Paris,

vi        OSCAR WILDE

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G. N. SUTTON

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**ON  
MEN  
AND  
WOMEN**



# APHORISMS OF OSCAR WILDE

## ON MEN AND WOMEN

THE proper basis for marriage is a mutual misunderstanding.

*Lord Arthur Savile's Crime*



IN married life three is company and two is none.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



WICKED women bother one.  
Good women bore one. That  
is the only difference between  
them.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



MY husband is a sort of pro-  
missory note; I'm tired of  
meeting him.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ALL women become like their  
mothers. That is their tragedy.  
No man does. That is his.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

MEN marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are disappointed.

*A Woman of No Importance*



I DON'T mind plain women being Puritans. It is the only excuse they have for being plain.

*A Woman of No Importance*



WOMEN give to men the very gold of their lives . . . but they invariably want it back in such very small change.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

AMERICA is the Paradise of women. That is why, like Eve, they are so extremely anxious to get out of it.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ONE should never trust a woman who tells one her real age. A woman who would tell one that would tell one anything.

*A Woman of No Importance*



WHAT nonsense people talk about happy marriages! A man can be happy with any woman, as long as he does not love her.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

No woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



WHEN a woman marries again it is because she detested her first husband. When a man marries again it is because

he adored his first wife.  
 Women try their luck; men  
 risk theirs!

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



TWENTY years of romance make  
 a woman look like a ruin; but  
 twenty years of marriage make  
 her something like a public  
 building.

*A Woman of No Importance*



THE history of women is the  
 history of the worst form of  
 tyranny the world has ever  
 known—the tyranny of the  
 weak over the strong. It is the  
 only tyranny that lasts.

*A Woman of No Importance*

MEN always want to be a woman's first love. That is their clumsy vanity. We women have a more subtle instinct about things. What we like is to be a man's last romance.

*A Woman of No Importance*

✥      ✥      ✥

NATURE . . . cares little about chastity, and it may be that it is to the shame of the Magdalen, and not to their own purity, that the Lucretias of modern life owe their freedom from stain.

*Intentions*

✥      ✥      ✥

THE one charm of the past is that it is the past. But women

never know when the curtain has fallen. They always want a sixth act, and as soon as the interest of the play is entirely over they propose to continue it.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

**ON  
CIVILIZATION**





## ON CIVILIZATION

**W**E are in the native land  
of the hypocrite.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



**SOUND** English common sense—  
the inherited stupidity of the  
race.

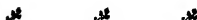
*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



**IF** one could only teach the  
English how to talk, and the

Irish how to listen, society would be quite civilized.

*An Ideal Husband*



THE East End . . . is the problem of slavery. And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ENGLAND will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions. There is more than one of her colonies which she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land.

*Intentions*

OUR countrymen . . . are more cunning than practical. When they make up their ledger, they balance stupidity by wealth, and vice by hypocrisy.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THERE is only one thing worse than Injustice, and that is Justice without her sword in her hand. ' When Right is not Might, it is Evil.

*Intentions*



As long as war is regarded as wicked, it will always have its fascination. When it is looked upon as vulgar, it will cease to be popular.

*Intentions*

ENGLAND has done one thing ; it has invented and established Public Opinion, which is an attempt to organize the community, and to elevate it to the dignity of physical force.

*Intentions*



WHAT between the duties expected of one during one's lifetime, and the duties exacted of one after one's death, man has ceased to be either a profit or a pleasure. It gives one position, and prevents one from keeping it up.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



THERE is much to be said in favour of modern journalism.

By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community. By carefully chronicling the current events of contemporary life, it shows us of what very little importance such events really are.

*Intentions*



THE youth of America is their oldest tradition. It has been going on now for three hundred years. To hear them talk one would imagine they were in their first childhood. As far as civilization goes they are in their second.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ON  
ART





## ON ART

IT is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.

*Preface to "Dorian Gray"*



ART has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



WHEN a man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet.

*Intentions*

MEREDITH is a prose Browning, and so is Browning. He used poetry as a medium for writing in prose.

*Intentions*



BEAUTY is a form of Genius—is higher, indeed, than Genius, as it needs no explanation.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



IN a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life but from each other.

*Pen, Pencil, and Poison*



THE nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of

Caliban seeing his own face  
in a glass.

*Preface to "Dorian Gray"*

✻                  ✻                  ✻

THE nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the  
rage of Caliban not seeing his  
own face in a glass.

*Preface to "Dorian Gray"*

✻                  ✻                  ✻

IF Shakespeare could sing  
with myriad lips, Browning  
could stammer through a  
thousand mouths.

*Intentions*

✻                  ✻                  ✻

POPULARITY is the crown of  
laurel which the world puts

upon bad art. Whatever is popular is wrong.

*Lecture to Art Students*



I THINK that the first duty of an art critic is to hold his tongue at all times, and upon all subjects.

*The English Renaissance of Art*



THE books which the world calls immoral are books which show the world its own shame.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



FROM the point of view of literature Mr. Kipling is a

genius who drops his aspirates.

*Intentions*



IF we wish to understand a nation by means of its art, let us look at its architecture or its music.

*Intentions .*



PEOPLE often talk as if there was an opposition between what is beautiful and what is useful. There is no opposition to beauty except ugliness.

*Art and the Handicraftsman*



WHAT is the difference between literature and journal-

ism? Journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read. That is all.

*Intentions*



WHATEVER is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to mediaevalism.

*Intentions*



A GOOD circus is an oasis of Hellenism in a world that reads too much to be wise, and thinks too much to be beautiful.

*London Models*



ONE should never talk of a moral or an immoral poem—

poems are either well written or badly written, that is all.

*The English Renaissance of Art*



To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any resemblance to the thing it criticizes.

*Intentions*



SUCH an expression as "English art" is a meaningless expression. One might just as well talk of English mathematics. Art is the science of beauty, and Mathematics the science



of truth: there is no national school of either.

*Lecture to Art Students*



MEDIOCRITY weighing mediocrity in the balance, and incompetence applauding its brother—that is the spectacle which the artistic activity of England affords us from time to time.

*Intentions*



To know the vintage and quality of wine one need not drink the whole cask. It must be perfectly easy in half an

hour to say whether a book is worth anything - or worth nothing.

*Intentions*



WE have no sympathy at all with the moral indignation of our time against M. Zola. It is simply the indignation of Tartuffe on being exposed

*Intentions*



THE modern novelist . . . has not even the courage of other people's ideas, but insists on going directly to life for everything.

*Intentions*

MR. Hall Caine aims at the grandiose, but then he writes at the top of his voice. He is so loud that one cannot hear what he says.

*Intentions*



MR. James Payn is an adept in the art of concealing what is not worth finding. He hunts down the obvious with the enthusiasm of a short-sighted detective.

*Intentions*



THAT great and daily increasing school of novelists for whom the sun always rises in the East End—the only thing that can be said about them

is that they find life crude,  
and leave it raw.

*Intentions*



MEREDITH! Who can define him? His style is chaos illumined by flashes of lightning. As a writer he has mastered everything except language: as a novelist he can do everything, except tell a story: as an artist he is everything except articulate.

*Intentions*



WE are overrun by a set of people who, when poet or painter passes away, arrive at the house along with the

undertaker, and forget that their one duty is to behave as mutes. . . . They are the mere body-snatchers of literature. The dust is given to one, and the ashes to another, and the soul is out of their reach.

*Intentions*



PHILOSOPHY may teach us to bear with equanimity the misfortunes of our neighbours, and science resolve the moral sense into a secretion of sugar ; but art is what makes the life of each citizen a sacrament and not a speculation, art is what makes the life of the whole race immortal.

*The English Renaissance of Art*

ON  
VICES,  
VIRTUES,  
AND  
EMOTIONS



## ON VICES, VIRTUES, AND EMOTIONS

**N**OTHING looks so like  
innocence as an indiscre-  
tion.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



**THE** basis of every scandal is  
an immoral certainty.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



**SIMPLE** pleasures . . . they are  
the last refuge of the complex.

*A Woman of No Importance*



BEING natural is simply a pose,  
and the most irritating pose  
I know.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE only way to get rid of  
a temptation is to yield to it.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE supreme vice is shallow-  
ness. Whatever is realized is  
right.

*De Profundis*



MODERATION is a fatal thing.  
Enough is as bad as a meal.  
More than enough is as good  
as a feast.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

THE only horrible thing in the world is *ennui*. That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



NOTHING makes one so vain as being told that one is a sinner. Conscience makes egoists of us all.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE man who regards his past is a man who deserves to have no future to look forward to.

*Intentions*

DISCONTENT is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation.

*A Woman of No Importance*



CONSCIENCE and cowardice are really the same things. Conscience is the trade name of the firm. That is all.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



IT is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



NEITHER at things nor at people should one look. Only

in mirrors should one look,  
for mirrors do but show us  
masks.

*Salomé*



FAITHFULNESS is to the emo-  
tional life what consistency is  
to the life of the intellect—  
simply a confession of failure.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



IT is better to be beautiful than  
to be good. But on the other  
hand, it is better to be good  
than to be ugly.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



PLEASURE is Nature's test, her  
sign of approval. When we

are happy we are always good,  
but when we are good we are  
not always happy.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



NOWADAYS most people die of  
a sort of creeping common  
sense, and discover when it is  
too late that the only things  
one never regrets are one's  
mistakes.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



I THINK to elope is cowardly.  
It's running away from danger,  
and danger has become so rare  
in modern life.

*A Woman of No Importance*

GOOD resolutions are useless attempts to interfere with scientific laws. Their origin is pure vanity. Their result is absolutely *nil*. They are simply cheques that men draw on a bank where they have no account.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play. If they know nothing of victory, they are at least spared the knowledge of defeat.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

MUSICAL people are so absurdly unreasonable. They always want one to be perfectly dumb at the very moment when one is longing to be absolutely deaf.

*An Ideal Husband*



THE only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.

*A Woman of No Importance*



WHAT is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless.

*Intentions*

A LITTLE sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal . . . What people call insincerity is simply a method by which we can multiply our personalities.

*Intentions*



AT twilight nature becomes a wonderfully suggestive effect, and is not without loveliness, though perhaps its chief use is to illustrate quotations from the poets.

*Intentions*



ONE knows so well the popular idea of health. The English country gentleman galloping



after a fox—the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uncat-able.

*A Woman of No Importance*



THE one advantage of playing with fire is that one never gets even singed. It is the people who don't know how to play with it who get burned up.

*A Woman of No Importance*



SOCIETY . . . feels instinctively that manners are of more importance than morals, and, in its opinion, the highest respectability is of much less value than the possession of a good *chef*.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

AFTER all, it is very poor consolation to be told that the man who has given one a bad dinner, or poor wine, is irreproachable in his private life. Even the cardinal virtues cannot atone for half-cold *entrées*.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



NOTHING is serious except passion. The Intellect is not a serious thing, and never has been. It is an instrument on which one plays, that is all. The only serious form of intellect I know is the British intellect. And on the British intellect the illiterates play the drum.

*A Woman of No Importance*



**ON  
EVERYTHING**



## ON EVERYTHING

**S**URELY Providence can  
resist temptation by this  
time.

*An Ideal Husband.*



To love oneself is the beginning  
of a life-long romance.

*An Ideal Husband*



EXPERIENCE is the name all  
men give to their mistakes.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*

QUESTIONS are never indiscreet.  
Answers sometimes are.

*An Ideal Husband*



LIFE is simply a *mauvais quart d'heure* made up of exquisite moments.

*A Woman of No Importance*



SOCIETY often forgives the criminal; it never forgives the dreamer.

*Intentions*



NOWADAYS it is only the unreadable that occurs.

*A Woman of No Importance*

IT is so easy to convert others.  
It is so difficult to convert  
oneself.

*Intentions*



WE all look at Nature too  
much, and live with her too  
little.

*De Profundis*



NOTHING is worth doing except  
what the world says is im-  
possible.

*Lecture to Art Students*



THE secret of life is suffering.  
It is what is hidden behind  
everything.

*De Profundis*



ANYBODY can make history.  
Only a great man can write  
it.

*Intentions*

✂      ✂      ✂

THE Creeds are believed, not  
because they are rational, but  
because they are repeated.

*Intentions*

✂      ✂      ✂

NEVER speak disrespectfully  
of Society. Only people who  
can't get into it do that.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

✂      ✂      ✂

ALL trials are trials for one's  
life, just as all sentences are  
sentences of death.

*De Profundis*

WHAT is termed orthodoxy is merely a facile, unintelligent acquiescence.

*De Profundis*



ONE should always play fairly —when one has the winning cards.

*An Ideal Husband*



THE tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THERE is no such thing as an omen. Destiny does not send us heralds.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

AN idea that is not dangerous  
is unworthy of being called  
an idea at all.

*Intentions*



IGNORANCE is like a delicate  
exotic fruit: touch it and the  
bloom is gone.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



ROMANCE should never begin  
with sentiment. It should  
begin with science and end  
with a settlement.

*An Ideal Husband*



WHEN one is in town one  
amuses oneself. When one is

in the country one amuses  
other people.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



IN this world there are only  
two tragedies. One is not  
getting what one wants, and  
the other is getting it.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



WHAT is a cynic? A man who  
knows the price of everything  
and the value of nothing.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



IF there was less sympathy in  
the world there would be less  
trouble in the world.

*An Ideal Husband*

MORALITY is simply the attitude we adopt towards people whom we personally dislike.

*An Ideal Husband*



OPTIMISM begins in a broad grin, and Pessimism ends with blue spectacles.

*An Ideal Husband*



IN modern life nothing produces such an effect as a good platitude. It makes the whole world kin.

*An Ideal Husband*



ONE'S past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged.

*An Ideal Husband*

THE Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden. It ends with Revelations.

*A Woman of No Importance*



To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual.

*Intentions*



NOTHING can cure the soul but the senses, just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



WHENEVER a man does a thoroughly stupid thing, it is

always from the noblest motives.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



Gossip is charming. History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



EVERY great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.

*Intentions*



FASHION is what one wears oneself. What is unfashionable is what other people wear.

*An Ideal Husband*

EVERY effect that one produces gives one an enemy. To be popular one must be a mediocrity.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison.

*De Profundis*



THE typewriting machine, when played with expression, is not more annoying than the piano when played by a sister or near relation.

*Letters from Reading Prison*



STUDY the Peerage. It is the one book a young man about town should know thoroughly, and it is the best thing in fiction the English have ever done.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ONE should never take sides in anything. Taking sides is the beginning of sincerity, and earnestness follows shortly afterwards, and the human being becomes a bore.

*A Woman of No Importance*



WHAT is truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In

matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood.

*Intentions*

•



WE can have in life but one great experience at best, and the secret of life is to reproduce that experience as often as possible.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



IF one doesn't talk about a thing, it has never happened. It is simply expression that gives reality to things.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

MOST people are other people. Their thoughts are some one else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

*De Profundis*



EVERYTHING to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its religion no less than faith.

*De Profundis*



PROSPERITY, pleasure, and success may be rough of grain and common of fibre, but sorrow is the most sensitive of all created things.

*De Profundis*

THE reason that we like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of our optimism is sheer terror.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*

EXAMINATIONS are of no value whatsoever. If a man is a gentleman, he knows quite enough, and if he is not a gentleman, whatever he knows is bad for him.

*A Woman of No Importance*



EDUCATION is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

*Intentions*



HEARTS live by being wounded. Pleasure may turn a heart to stone, riches may make it

callous, but sorrow cannot break it.

*A Woman of No Importance*



THE soul is born old but grows young. That is the comedy of life. The body is born young and grows old. That is life's tragedy.

*A Woman of No Importance*



CHILDREN begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.

*A Woman of No Importance*



THERE is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mort-

gaged to Life. The old are in life's lumber-room.

*A Woman of No Importance*



It is love, and not German philosophy, that is the true explanation of this world, whatever may be the explanation of the next.

*An Ideal Husband*



THE truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*

PRIVATE information is practically the source of every large modern fortune . . . and public scandal invariably the result.

*An Ideal Husband*



A SENTIMENTALIST is a man who sees an absurd value in everything, and doesn't know the market price of any single thing.

*Lady Windermere's Fan*



SCHOPENHAUER has analysed the pessimism that characterizes modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The



world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy.

*Intentions*



It is a very dangerous thing to listen. If one listens one may be convinced; and a man who allows himself to be convinced by an argument is a thoroughly unreasonable person.

*An Ideal Husband*



To get into the best society, nowadays, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people—that is all! To

be in it is merely a bore.  
But to be out of it is simply  
a tragedy.

*A Woman of No Importance*



ONE can survive everything  
nowadays except death. Death  
and vulgarity are the only  
two facts in the nineteenth  
century that one cannot ex-  
plain away.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



EACH of the professions  
means a prejudice. The neces-  
sity for a career forces every  
one to take sides. We live  
in the age of the overworked  
and the under-educated, the

age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid.

*Intentions*



It is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

*The Importance of Being Earnest*



NAMES are everything. I never quarrel with actions: my one quarrel is with words. That is the reason why I hate vulgarism in literature. The man who could call a spade

a spade should be compelled to use one. It is the only thing he is fit for.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray*



THE more one analyses people, the more all reasons for analysis disappear. Sooner or later one comes to that dreadful universal thing called human nature. Indeed, as any one who has ever worked among the poor knows only too well, the brotherhood of man is no mere poet's dream, it is a most depressing and humiliating reality.

*Intentions*

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